

Machines/Environments

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To outline the significance and potential of media studies today is, in many ways, to address an endless field. It is hard to think of areas within the humanities that would not, in one way or other, be touched by perspectives on media, mediation, technologies, formats and infrastructures. And with increasing attention to the fact that *a medium must mean but be*—as outlined in John Durham Peter’s work on the elemental or existential of water, clouds, fire and stars—media studies could be seen as a lens to study the modes and materialities of connection at stake in all possible forms of relation, across all forms of being.

My own approach seems to waver between approaches that explicitly draw on such wider, environmental or existential takes on media—as seen in a number of artistic practices that address situations of mediation in more indirect, hidden or abstract ways—and a more focused preoccupation with the ingression of specific machines and technologies in the sphere of 20th- and 21st-century art and their ramification for aesthetic-political practice and thinking (Blom 2016, 2017). In the latter case, I am particularly interested in the way in which technologies of memory often tend to produce alternative social ontologies within the expanded field of art practice—a technologically informed take on the forms of social reflexivity that play such an important role in modern and contemporary art. If we agree with

Émile Durkheim that society *is* memory, significant changes in the available technologies of memory must necessarily also affect the definition of the social itself, including the sociality explored in a number of art practices. As the effects of the dynamic, “living” memory of analog video expanded across art practices in the 1960s and 1970s, it became possible to trace the way in which a concept of social memory based on a conflation of memory with storage (or forms of inscription that remain relatively stable over time) was replaced by an understanding of memory as temporal events geared towards the future and defined by difference and repetition.¹ Yet, paying attention to the genuinely time-producing forces of a memory technology such as analog video also meant that video could no longer be approached, wholesale, as “a” medium. It was, more precisely, a rapidly evolving set of machines, components and affordances that produced a number of different instances of sociality or collectivity in or through the work of different artists and activists—forms that could not be subsumed under any one master theory. These are, to follow Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of technical objects, the concretizations or individuations of a memory technology “using” the contexts of art as an associated milieu in which its own capacities—and particularly those kept in check by the strictures of the broadcasting institutions—can unfold. For this type of research perspective, the type of operative and diagrammatically-oriented media archaeography outlined in the work of Wolfgang Ernst becomes useful, focusing as it does on the active inscriptions of machine realities that cannot simply be reduced to the standardized operating

¹ See Durkheim’s discussion of the way in which shared memory of the past confers collective identity in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, as well as Maurice Halbwachs’s description of the relative stability of the material frameworks of collective memory in *On Collective Memory*. A very different account of the temporalities of collective memory appear in Maurizio Lazzarato’s discussion of Gabriel Tarde’s monadological approach to sociology: this again provides the basis for tracing the new forms of social reflexivity that unfolds alongside of new and dynamic technologies of memory (Blom, “Introduction” in *Memory in Motion*)

systems supporting familiar cultural interfaces based on iconographic, theatrical, literary or journalistic modes of presentation and interaction. Yet, versus the tendency of this approach to eschew all references to sociality so as to focus on the features of machine hardware operating at speeds incompatible with human perception must also be countered: what counts is the wider relational matrices instigated by such microtemporal and time-producing forms of agency.

There is, of course, no clear-cut distinction between this machine-oriented approach in the more limited sense of the term and the wider environmental perspectives outlined initially: The connection between memory technologies and social ontologies obviously alert us to the existential vectors of media, rather than their communications and significations. Yet, from an art historical perspective, I am specifically interested in the more vague or indirect approaches to modern media technologies that can found throughout 20th- and 21st-century art, practices that “think” and enact technologically inflected scenarios without necessarily using the technologies in question in the works themselves. Freed from the overarching focus on the typical productions or communications of a given medium or format, the circuitous strategies of such works often tend to draw attention to unthought ramifications of specific media and their less-evident social, political and aesthetic powers. To give a brief example, I am currently interested in the ways in which certain recurrent figures in 20th- and 21st-century art seem to work around a distinct infrastructural sensibility, more specifically, a sensibility oriented toward the new infrastructures of sensing that emerged in embryonic form in the technomathematical approaches to human perception and sensation that first appeared in late 19th-century psychophysics and that was developed into a more full scale project with the emergence of cognitive and affective computing in the late 1950s (Blom, 2019). Revolving

around the recurring artistic phenomenon of straight lines geared towards topological continuities rather than formalist construction, this scenario seems, among other things, to be closely associated with the type of withdrawing or disappearing works produced in and around the international Fluxus network in the early 1960s, works that seem to exist in a realm *beyond* emphatic media and their various ways of drawing attention. Existing, like much infrastructure, at the level of the rarely seen and barely perceived, the works in question signal their complicity with the new technologies of late capitalism – the electronic networks whose radical extension of mathematical rationality into sensorial realms might generate not just limit modes of bodily existence, but also an attunement to the many different ways in which infrastructures, as Lauren Berlant (394) points out, bind us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself.

Working along the fault line between new modes of artistic abstraction and the realm of technopolitical development, it could be a way of addressing aspects of the *practical* abstraction that Alberto Toscano sees as the key mark of social life under capitalism.

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